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Navajo leadership meets with DOI Secretary Salazar on Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project and broader Navajo Nation concerns

WINDOW ROCK – Navajo Nation leadership met with Secretary Ken Salazar of U.S. Department of Interior today for over two hours at the Navajo Department of Transportation building—primarily to hear about the \$43 million financial assistance being awarded to the Navajo Nation for the design and construction of a portion of the Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project.

“Under the terms of today’s agreement, the Navajo Nation will be responsible for the design, construction, and oversight of Reaches 24.1, 25, and 26 of the Cutter Lateral, which consists of approximately 43.4 miles of water pipeline, a pumping station, and four storage tanks,” stated a news release issued by DOI on Sept. 27.

The water supply project, which broke ground in June, will have the potential to deliver clean water to a population of approximately 250,000 when it is completed.

Construction will occur on the nation along the U.S. Highway 550 corridor south of Farmington, N.M., and water could be delivered to communities along the Cutter Lateral as early as 2015.

Secretary Salazar expressed his appreciation and gratitude to personnel from the Navajo Nation and DOI, as well as Navajo leadership for working to accomplish such an important task.

Secretary Salazar added that Navajo-Gallup Water Supply Project is a high-priority infrastructure project identified by President Obama’s Administration.

“This project is a matter of improving the quality of life for Diné people in the affected communities,” said Speaker Johnny Naize (Low Mountain, Many Farms, Nazlini, Tachee/Blue Gap, Tselani/ Cottonwood). “The Council and I are delighted to know that this project will enable easier access to safe drinking water and create opportunities for development and growth.”

“We are thankful for the assistance and this is a true example of how we are working together,” stated President Ben Shelly. “The project is the cornerstone of the settlement of the Navajo Nation’s claims of the San Juan River in New Mexico. The project will involve nearly 300 miles of pipeline, water treatment, pumping, and storage facilities.”

Speaker Johnny Naize, council delegates, and Justice Eleanor Shirley also had an opportunity to dialogue with Secretary Salazar on broader issues of importance to the Nation.

In his statement, Speaker Naize addressed the future of the Office of Navajo and Hopi Indian Relocation's continued operation, rehabilitation of the Former Bennett Freeze Area, the negative impacts of the most recent EPA rulings on power plants located on the Navajo Nation, and forward funding for post-secondary education.

"Every day, Navajo families approach me about the hardships they have suffered because of the relocation law and the construction freezes. It is clear to me that the impact of the Land Dispute and the Bennett Freeze will be with us for many more generations," commented Speaker Naize.

We will need your help in developing the former Bennett Freeze area. We anticipate a need of at least 1,000 homes to over 10,000 individuals to the area. We recommend the task be assigned to the ONHIR given their history in working with previous relocation efforts."

On the matter of energy development, Speaker Naize and delegates conveyed to Secretary Salazar that EPA rulings affect the Navajo Nation on a grander scale because a majority of the tribe's revenues derive from the development of coal.

Navajo leadership also underscored the importance of consulting with the Navajo Nation to ensure that future rulings will not further threaten the operation of power plants on the Nation.

Delegates also raised the following concerns for Secretary Salazar to consider: the deficient maintenance of BIA roads, the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project, funding for higher education, and the need for a DOI office in Window Rock.

Justice Shirley, who was representing the Navajo Nation Judicial Branch, also submitted comments to Secretary Salazar cautioning against budget cuts to DOI, BIA, and the Department of Justice; addressed the shortfall in funding for the operation of courts; and asked that the Department's permit not be used to allow the use of effluent to make artificial snow on *Dook'o'osliid*.

"Finally, and most importantly, the Chief Justice and I plea with you and President Obama to not allow the ski resort upon *Dook'o'osliid*, the San Francisco Peaks, to use your Department's Forest Service permit to desecrate a most sacred site of our people," stated Justice Shirley. "Economic gain and entertainment must never supersede protection of sacred sites which sustain native peoples."

Secretary Salazar invited Navajo leadership to Washington, D.C. to discuss the issues in more depth before the year is over.

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